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"Work-a-Day" Compensation in Farmer Participatory Research

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ABSTRACT

Constraints to farmer participation in agricultural research require public institutions to compensate farmers for their involvement in research projects. Because of potential funding limitations in public institutions, it is important to identify approaches to compensate farmers who do not exclusively rely upon monetary remuneration. A novel barter compensation approach, called *work-a-day* compensation, is proposed. This approach involves compensating farmers for their time and involvement in research studies by having the principal investigator work for participating farmers. Twenty-four farmers throughout eastern Nebraska were offered work-a-day compensation for their involvement in a soil quality assessment study. Farmers' opinions of work-a-day compensation were surveyed as part of the study. One-third of the farmers participating in the study chose to utilize the work-a-day compensation offer. Comments were positive, and the majority (54%) felt that work-a-day compensation would be either very or somewhat important in their decision to participate in future studies. Experiences from work-a-day compensation were beneficial to both participating farmers and the principal investigator. Farmers benefited by receiving help doing chores or learning more about the principal investigator's technical expertise. The principal investigator benefited by acquiring more understanding and appreciation for the challenges that farmers face daily. Potential benefits from work-a-day compensation to public institutions include an improved image among farmers and greater farmer participation in research studies. Drawbacks of this compensation approach, however, such as liability issues, the high degree of mechanization of many farms, and researcher time may relegate it to being applicable only in unique situations.

ON-FARM agricultural research by public institutions is increasing. As a result, farmers are looked upon more and more as partners in research. Benefits from farmer participation in agricultural research arise mainly from their knowledge of specific ecosystems (Gardner, 1990). This knowledge is not only useful in setting appropriate research priorities for a particular locale, but can be indispensable in interpretation of research observations (Lockeretz and Anderson, 1993; p. 108–109).

Despite the benefits of having farmers involved in agricultural research, getting farmer participation is not always easy. Constraints on farmers' time can be severe, especially when field activities must be conducted within a limited window of climatic opportunity and plant development (Bender, 1994; p. 86–87). Farmers' time spent on activities (research or otherwise) outside of the most pressing concerns is often difficult to justify. Furthermore, if a specific project is initiated by a university researcher and a farmer is only contributing land and management of the crop, the research is *owned* by the researcher and may attract limited concern or involvement by the farmer (Francis et al., 1992). In these situations, farmers must be convinced that their involvement in a particular study is important for reasons other than personal gain.

Time and interest constraints to farmer participation in agricultural research may require public institutions compensate farmers in some way. Traditional forms of compensation by public institutions include sharing data and monetary remuneration. Sharing data in a manner that is understandable to farmers is a must, but on its own may not be enough to convince them to participate in research studies. Paying farmers for their participation in research studies has been suggested as a way to promote a climate of mutual respect between farmers and researchers (Thornley, 1990). Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) incorporates farmer payments in grant proposals; a farmer receives $400 for conducting an on-farm trial, or $600 if the trial includes a farm tour open to the public (C.A. Francis, 1997, personal communication). The North Central Professional Development Program reimburses farmers at the rate of $100 per day as a consulting fee for their contributions to sustainable agriculture training programs (Carter and Francis, 1995).

Though monetary remuneration by public institutions may be desirable, it may not always be possible. Applied on-farm research generally does not attract as much funding as more basic research. As a result, paying farmers for their time and effort in research studies could be limited by budgetary constraints unless it is anticipated and included in grant proposals as a legitimate research expense.

There is a need for alternative approaches to compensate farmers for their involvement in agricultural research. One approach is to exchange work for data. More specifically, this approach, loosely called *work-a-day* compensation, would reimburse farmers for their involvement in research studies by having the principal investigator work for participating farmers.

The purpose of this article is to describe experiences from participating in work-a-day compensation. Benefits, drawbacks, and farmers' opinions of this type of compensation are also presented.

METHODS

Offer of Compensation

Work-a-day compensation was offered as reimbursement for involvement in a study evaluating farmers' perceptions of soil quality indicators (Liebig, 1998). Twenty-six farmers throughout eastern Nebraska were selected for the study in the spring of 1996. The compensation was initially offered in a letter outlining the details of the study regarding its

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Abbreviations: PFI, Practical Farmers of Iowa.

Table 1. Relative importance placed on work-a-day compensation by farmers participating in study ($n = 24$).

Question	Percent response		
	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important
How important was work-a-day compensation in your decision to participate in this study?	13	33	54
How important would work-a-day compensation be in your decision to participate in future studies on your farm, regardless of their subject matter?	13	42	46

degree of involvement, expectations, and time required. The offer was phrased as follows:

> *Should you decide to participate in this study, I am willing to compensate you for your time spent filling out the questionnaires by working one eight-hour period on your farm at your discretion. Hopefully during that time, I cannot only provide some help with basic chores, but can also learn more about your management system, your concerns/questions about agricultural research, and your thoughts about agriculture in general.*

Two weeks after sending the letter, potential participants were called by telephone and consent for participation in the study was determined. Of the 26 farmers selected for the study, 24 chose to participate. At the time of the phone interview, participating farmers were asked if they planned to utilize the compensation offer. For those farmers who wanted to do so, arrangements for providing work-a-day compensation were made.

Survey of Farmers' Opinions

Farmers' opinions of work-a-day compensation were sought as an addendum to the primary focus of the aforementioned study. After participating in the study, each farmer was asked two questions regarding work-a-day compensation:

- *How important was work-a-day compensation in your decision to participate in this study?*
- *How important would work-a-day compensation be in your decision to participate in future studies on your farm, regardless of their subject matter?*

Responses were recorded using a Likert-type scale; possible responses were very important, somewhat important, and not important (Judd et al., 1991; p. 163). Respondents were then asked to share any comments they had about work-a-day compensation. Comments were recorded verbatim.

RESULTS

Compensation Experiences

Eight of the 24 farmers participating in the study chose to utilize the work-a-day compensation offer. Two farmers used the compensation by having the principal investigator (first author) assist with labor-intensive chores. Chores included replacing worn-out gates on irrigation pipe and removing weeds from row crops and rangeland. Six farmers took liberties regarding the form of compensation and opted to utilize the technical expertise of the principal investigator.

Table 2. Farmers' comments about work-a-day compensation.

- Nice to know someone is willing to work for information. Farmers get tired of being asked to fill out paperwork while getting nothing in return.
- Liked the concept.
- Good, but in the future we would like to use your expertise in setting up a grid sampling.
- Appreciated the offer, but would have done the study regardless.
- Ain't seen how good a worker you are.
- Felt good with the offer.
- Important to make the offer.
- Interesting offer. However, the question is, what should we have you do when you come to work so that you can understand what we're doing.
- My interest in the study drives my decision to participate. However, the compensation is a good idea. For me, I would like to get more out of you than just brute labor.
- The compensation is nice but I'm interested in the results of the study. Interested in helping the researcher collect data.
- I was willing to help with the study because you weren't pushy when you first called me on the phone.
- It is a polite and gracious offer, and I'm not offended by it. I'm extremely comfortable with the offer. I would offer it if our roles were reversed.
- Just looking forward to seeing the results of the study.
- Appreciated it, but would have done project regardless of compensation offer. Your expertise was most important.
- Nice idea. Nice gesture. Would generally work with people from the university.
- I'm just looking for an unbiased report on fertilizer recommendations. I just want to know what's right and wrong.
- It gave me the perception of a person who was willing to work for his research and not out to just get the data and run.
- My involvement in future studies would depend upon the time requirement and when the study was conducted.
- Nice offer to make. Cash would have been nice, though. Farmers are expected to participate without compensation. Government studies do this.
- Subject matter of the study is what matters most.
- Appreciated.
- Nice gesture. If I were required to go through sit-down training, the compensation would have been nice. Information from the study is most important.
- Appreciated the offer. It's limited by the expertise of the individual, though.
- Didn't expect it. It was appreciated. It makes the farmer aware of what the researcher is doing. Research is important, too.

Two farmers had the investigator give presentations about soil quality during individual farm tours, while four others requested specific soil quality assessments be conducted on their farms. Though these forms of compensation were not anticipated, it was considered to be an appropriate modification of the original offer, provided it did not adversely affect the scheduled data collection of the main study.

Survey Results

The majority of farmers did not assign importance to work-a-day compensation in their decision to participate in the study (Table 1). Only 46% of farmers considered work-a-day compensation to be either very or somewhat important in their decision to participate. However, a slightly greater percentage of farmers (54%) felt that work-a-day compensation would be either very or somewhat important in their decision to participate in future studies. For both questions, 13% of farmers considered the compensation very important. Trends in relative importance among the three response categories did not differ between farmers who chose to utilize work-a-day compensation and those who did not (data not shown).

Comments provided by farmers about work-a-day compensation were generally positive (Table 2). Farmers repeatedly commented that they appreciated the compensation offer, thought it was a good idea, and considered it a nice

gesture. Two farmers voiced their approval of the *working for data* concept that the compensation was based on. Eight farmers clearly indicated through their comments that their motivation to participate in the study was due to its subject matter. However, of those eight farmers, five spoke positively of work-a-day compensation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Only one-third of the farmers participating in the study utilized the work-a-day compensation offer. Reasons for this vary, but are likely linked to farmer interest in the main study. Comments made by farmers about work-a-day compensation included those that indicated an strong interest in the results of the study. Consequently, the results were likely ample compensation for many farmers.

Results from the first survey question about work-a-day compensation were, at best, neutral. Here, farmer interest in the main study may also have had an effect on the outcome of results. Because of the appealing nature of the main study to many of the participants, the offer of work-a-day compensation was likely less a factor in their decision to participate. Though this bodes well for the relevance of the study in addressing questions farmers have, it does raise concern that the sample population was potentially biased regarding compensation. However, the bias is in the direction of the compensation being less a factor in the study, not more. Had the subject matter of the study not appealed to the participants as much as it did, the compensation may have likely played a bigger role in their decision to participate, thereby potentially increasing its relative importance and creating an opposite bias.

The relative importance placed on work-a-day compensation by farmers increased only slightly when participation in future studies was considered. The minor difference in results between the two survey questions may reflect that the subject matter of a study plays a dominant role in the decision to participate, regardless of compensation. It is important to note, however, that some degree of importance was placed on work-a-day compensation for participation in future studies by the majority of farmers polled.

Despite the neutral to slightly positive response by farmers to work-a-day compensation in the survey, there were numerous benefits associated with it: benefits to farmers, to the principal investigator, and to the institution the principal investigator represented. Each are addressed below.

In many respects, work-a-day compensation offered a win-win situation for farmers and the principal investigator above and beyond what would have likely been achieved with monetary remuneration. The farmers who used the compensation to get assistance with basic chores benefited by receiving help doing activities that were either difficult or undesirable to do alone. Those farmers who chose to utilize the principal investigator's technical expertise benefited by learning more about soil quality through either formal presentations during farm tours or results from specific assessments.

Benefits to the principal investigator from work-a-day compensation experiences were substantial. The experiences increased the investigator's awareness and understanding of the practical concerns farmers face daily. The time spent with farmers during the compensation periods was generally filled with spirited discussions over a variety of topics, many of which were directly related to agriculture. This time was invaluable in understanding the broader concerns and questions farmers had, not just those that were related to the investigator's study. Additionally, work-a-day compensation allowed the principal investigator to share his expertise with farmers. Technical consulting (soil quality assessments) and presentations during farm tours maximized the use of the principal investigator's unique talents, compared with routine labor tasks.

Benefits to farmers and agricultural researchers from work-a-day compensation represent a synergism that might not otherwise exist with other forms of compensation. As shown above, the potential for farmers and researchers to share knowledge and increase their understanding of one another is significant with this compensation approach. The benefits from work-a-day compensation, however, do not stop with those actively involved. The institutions agricultural researchers represent stand to gain from work-a-day compensation. Because work-a-day compensation is essentially a representation of a researcher coming down from the *ivory tower* to work with farmers, the perception farmers have of research institutions may be improved. There is also potential to increase farmer participation in research studies by using this form of compensation. Potential participants in a study may be impressed enough with the offer of work-a-day compensation to decide to be involved. This could be an effective method to involve *hard-to-get* farmers, who are not swayed by the subject matter of a study or monetary remuneration.

Despite the many benefits associated with work-a-day compensation, there are a few drawbacks. Liability issues associated with potential injury to the worker or damage to farm equipment are of utmost concern with this form of compensation. When work-a-day compensation was carried out in this study, the principal investigator assumed all liability for any blunders that would have resulted in injury or damage. Whether or not this is appropriate is debatable. However, because of the potential for unforeseen accidents even with the most careful of workers, an agreement addressing liability issues would likely need to be signed by the worker and farmer before conducting the compensation.

In addition to liability issues, there are other drawbacks to work-a-day compensation. The high degree of mechanization of many farms requires hired help to possess working knowledge and experience with farm machinery. This is a potential limitation to work-a-day compensation, as few younger agricultural researchers come from farm backgrounds. This point was summed up appropriately by one farmer, who said the compensation is limited by the expertise of the individual (Table 2). However, this constraint could be overcome through identification of other forms of compensation that fall within the investigator's capabilities and that would be agreeable to the farmer. This shows how work-a-day compensation is inherently flexible, allowing farmers and agricultural researchers to creatively identify appropriate forms of compensation.

Researcher time may also be a constraint to work-a-day compensation, or even researcher willingness to try such an approach. These problems could be overcome by choosing

the right sample size and finding willing investigators before starting a research project. Because of all these drawbacks, work-a-day compensation may only be applicable in unique situations.

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